

Their
Mysterious
ways
TOO



*More Amazing Stories
of God's Animals and Us*

EDITORS OF GUIDEPOSTS

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Their Mysterious Ways Too

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When Michael Met Rosie

Claire Guthrie

*W*e're getting a dog! We're getting a dog!" the kids chanted from the back of our car on the way to Pennsylvania to pick up Rosie, our new Lab, from her foster home. I glanced back at my teenager, Aaron, his younger sister, Rachael, seven, and brother Joshua, five, who hadn't stopped talking about Rosie since we'd pulled out of our driveway in Virginia an hour before. Only my two-year-old, Michael, was silent. He was just as excited, but he couldn't join in with the chatter of his siblings. I felt a familiar ache in my chest, knowing how badly Michael wanted to join in, and knowing it was impossible. It was a pain I felt often, ever since we found out about Michael's condition.

I knew something was different about Michael when he was six months old. Josh and Rachael walked and talked early. But our otherwise healthy-looking baby boy had trouble even crawling; Michael couldn't roll over and he couldn't sit up without toppling. Even more troubling, he never developed baby talk. I wondered if he'd ever speak. His brother Aaron has cerebral palsy, and I feared Michael might have a disability too. In fact, Michael was diagnosed with dyspraxia, a developmental disorder that makes it difficult to perform complex movements. Michael's trouble with speaking was part of that disorder, called childhood apraxia of speech. He wanted to speak, but his mind just wouldn't let him.

Even now, at two years and three months, he still couldn't say much more than "mama" or "dada" when he wanted us for something. And often, we couldn't understand what he wanted. His speech therapist helped us teach him some basic sign language. Even that was hard for him. A few days earlier, Michael tried to ask me for something, but he couldn't form the signs. Instead, he began gesturing wildly. "I'm sorry, Michael. I don't understand," I told him. His face turned a deep shade of red; he went into a tantrum, letting out a high-pitched scream. I felt so helpless. My baby was hurting—and I couldn't do anything for him.

I looked in the rearview mirror back at Michael, who was staring out the window. This dog, I hoped, would be something he could enjoy. My husband, Doug, and I had done our research. We looked for a Labrador, a breed known to be good with kids. A young dog, so it could grow up with our children. We found Rosie on the Web site for a Lab rescue agency. A fourteen-month-old chocolate Lab, with experience around babies, children and cats. All of our "dream dog" qualities. But would she be right for our family? Was I wrong to hope? Finally we pulled up to Rosie's foster home. I silently prayed, Please, God, let Rosie be right for our kids... especially Michael, but don't let me hope for too much.

Doug lifted Michael out of his car seat while I went to the door with the other kids. "You must be here to see Rosie," the woman said. And there Rosie was, standing in the foyer, tongue hanging out, her tail wagging wildly. Aaron, Rachael and Joshua ran up to her. "Rosie, you're so beautiful," Rachael said, ruffling her smooth fur. "Hi, Rosie," said Aaron, scratching her behind the ears. Love at first sight, I thought. But what about my two-year-old? Michael ambled over. He patted her gently on the head. Rosie nuzzled against him. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I was about to follow the woman into the other room to talk to her about the dog when I heard a voice, an unfamiliar voice. "Rosie," the voice said, strong and clear. "Rosie!" It was Michael. I looked at Doug,

my mouth agape. “Rosie!” he said again, nuzzling against the dog. Now, Doug and I were the speechless ones.

Rosie sat in the back with the kids on the way home. “You’re going to love our house, Rosie Pops,” I said.

The kids loved the nickname. The whole ride back, that’s what we called her. We were about halfway home when Michael spoke again. “Rosie Pops,” he said. One word was amazing enough, but two words together? In one day? Doug and I chalked it up to Michael’s excitement. Don’t get your hopes up, I reminded myself. How often had I seen progress when there was none? God, I prayed once more, make this dog a good fit for our family.

A few days later I was folding laundry, watching the kids play with Rosie. Michael stood next to her, petting her as she rubbed up against him. Then, without warning, she jumped, and Michael lost his balance. I watched in horror as he fell over. I dropped everything and rushed to him. But I calmed down when I saw Michael laughing. He pushed off the carpet and stood, following Rosie again as she raced around the room. I watched more closely. Rosie wasn’t being reckless. Every time she nudged Michael, she did it gently, almost as if she were testing him. And each time he fell, she waited by his side, studying him until he rose to his feet. It was a little game they were playing. A game Rosie was using to learn things about Michael.

The next night, at dinner, Michael shocked everyone when he said “juice.” Right out of the blue! A day later, he said “dog.” It’s hard to describe the astonishment that took over our house. Over the next few weeks, he added more words: candy, cookie, car. He was also becoming less clumsy—rarely stumbling. His speech therapist was baffled. “Kids with apraxia don’t progress like this,” she told me.

I was baffled too. I went on an apraxia Web site and e-mailed for information. “Is there anything about dogs helping kids with apraxia?” I asked. Yes, as it turned out. Studies found the stimulation a dog brings

can awaken muscles necessary for speech and other bodily movements. Each time Michael laughed, fell and got back up again, his brain was busily connecting the dots between his muscles and his actions. Now I knew why he was improving.

I went up to tuck Michael into bed. He was exhausted from playing with Rosie all day. I pulled the blanket up to his chest and gave him a kiss. Michael moved his lips. “Luv vu,” he said. Did he say that? Michael spoke again. “Luv vu,” he said.

I wrapped my arms around him. “I love you, Michael,” I whispered through my tears. “I love you too.” I shut off his light and headed to the living room. Rosie lay curled up by the TV. I stroked behind her ears and told her what a good girl she was. She was teaching Michael so much—and me as well. God answers prayers in many ways. This time He chose a dog to answer ours. Hope comes in many forms, and I must never forsake it.